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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended to help collaborative groups work together more effectively to promote children's readiness for school and provides useful information on the many factors that affect school readiness. The guide notes North Carolina's definition of school readiness as the condition of children as they enter school, based on five developmental domains, including approaches to learning and social/emotional development. The guide then explores the importance of school readiness for student success and the complexities involved in whether or not a child is ready, which include family factors, early childhood care and education, school transitional practices, emergent literacy, and community/neighborhood factors. The remainder of the guide then explores how communities can begin to address readiness and highlights factors for successful collaboration, such as involving all stakeholders, discussing the partnership's decision-making process early in its development, and disseminating data and information from assessments and evaluation. Steps for forming an effective collaborative partnership are outlined, as are important lessons learned by established collaborative partnerships. The guide concludes with a brief list of relevant resources. (HTH)

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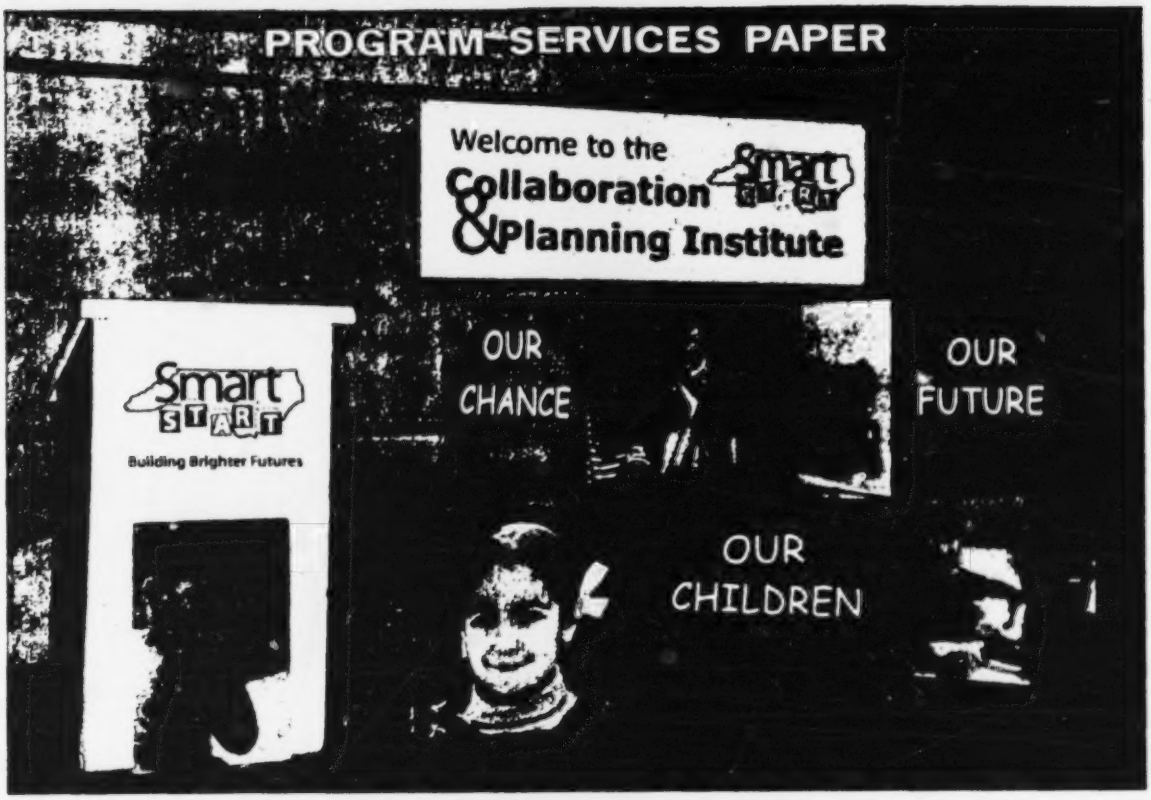

What it Takes to Support School Readiness: Building Collaborative Partnerships

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This document provides useful information on the many factors that impact children's readiness for school. It is intended to help collaborative groups work together more effectively to promote children's readiness.

This year, more than 100,000 of North Carolina's youngest citizens will enter kindergarten. "Are they ready?" and "Has each child received the support and experiences she needs in order to be successful in school?" These may be the questions of greatest interest to those towns and communities that have set for themselves the goal of enhancing children's readiness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL READINESS

More than a decade ago, the President and the state governors outlined six goals aimed at helping children be more successful in school. While all of these goals are important, one stands above the rest: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn."

To help parents, schools, and communities achieve this *readiness* goal, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) identified three related objectives that reflect important early supports for school readiness:

- All children should have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that prepare them for school.
- Every parent in the United States will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping his preschool child learn. To accomplish this, parents should have access to the training and support they need.
- Children should receive the nutrition, physical activity and health care they need to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies and to maintain mental alertness.

This goal and its objectives emphasize the fact that children's readiness to learn depends on a number of factors and is a *process* that begins long before children are enrolled in kindergarten.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF READINESS

Whether or not children are prepared to be successful in school depends on a multitude of factors that are closely related and intertwined. Children's preparedness and success in school depend on the quality of experiences and opportunities that occur prior to entering school (e.g., preschool). Readiness is also influenced by children's physical health/well-being, their ability to communicate and relate to others and their general knowledge and understanding of the world. In addition, readiness and school success are also related to variations in family background (e.g., mother's education, family structure) and home experiences (e.g., parent-child reading).

This is a complex mix, and all of these factors must be optimized for children to be successful in school. Unfortunately, many children don't receive the resources and support they need and are coming to school unprepared for success.

Recent results from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten* indicate that teachers reported that one-quarter of America's children entering kindergarten were relatively uneager to learn, and one-third were having difficulty paying attention in class. In addition, parents reported that one in six children had difficulty concentrating and one in nine experienced problems with speech (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000).

The policy brief produced by *Child Trends* (2000) outlines a framework to help communities support and promote school readiness. This framework encourages communities to adopt a broad, comprehensive view of child development and includes the following elements: child health, family factors, early childhood care and education, school transitional practices, emergent literacy, community/neighborhood factors, and factors beyond the community (e.g., media).

North Carolina Definition of School Readiness

School readiness is defined by...

(1) The condition of children when they enter school, based on the following five domains of development:

- Health/physical development
- Social/emotional development
- Approaches to learning
- Language development and communication
- Cognition and general knowledge

(2) The capacity of schools to serve all children effectively (e.g., personnel, policies, materials, etc.)

School Readiness in NC: Strategies for defining, measuring, and promoting success for all children. (2000). Greensboro, NC: SERVE

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Child health
The first three years of life are particularly important in terms of brain growth and the development of cognitive potential. As a result, children's physical health and well-being are important precursors for success in school. Children who are healthy, alert, and energetic are able to give their full attention to learning in school. This element encompasses such factors as children's early health (e.g., birth weight, prematurity), nutrition, accidents/injury, immunizations, and emotional/behavioral difficulties.

Family factors
Research consistently confirms that families play a critical role in supporting and shaping children's early development. As a result, parent education and family support programs are often viewed as viable ways to strengthen readiness for school. This element focuses on the quality of the home environment (e.g., parent-child interaction), family structure (e.g., single-parent, non-resident father, etc), and family economic status.

Early childhood care & education
Early care and education of young children is particularly important in determining success in school. By providing high-quality child care, communities can help ensure children will be successful in school.

Indicators of high-quality child care include:

- Well-educated, well-trained teachers/caregivers/directors
- Small classes
- Low adult/child ratio
- Age-appropriate materials
- Well-defined curriculum
- Strong family participation

The Need for Quality Care and Education

One of the goals of all local Smart Start partnerships in NC is to make high-quality child care available and affordable for all children who need it. The results of a recent study of 508 kindergarten children in six counties in NC found that children who attended child care centers that were highly involved in Smart Start quality improvement activities:

- Entered kindergarten with higher vocabulary scores.
- Experienced fewer behavior problems than their non-Smart Start peers.

(Maxwell, Bryant, & Miller-Johnson, 1999)

School transitional practices
The transition from preschool or home to kindergarten is one of the most important moves a child will experience. Children's success in school can be linked to effective transition practices and activities. General guidelines for smoothing transitions include creating connections between the sending and receiving programs, encouraging parent involvement and identifying children in need of additional services.

"Let us put our minds together and see what life we will make for our children." *Tatanka Iotanka (Sitting Bull)*

Emergent literacy
Learning to read and write is one of the most important achievements in a young child's life. Success in learning to read is based in large part on developing language and literacy-related skills very early in life. To ensure that children develop these skills, it is important to expose children to high-quality language and literacy environments both at home and in early care/education programs.

Community/neighborhood factors
Research suggests that the nature of the neighborhood and communities where children reside may have an effect on their development. This seems to be particularly true for children and families living in poor, dangerous environments. Conditions that create constant stress and strain for parents can make it difficult for them to be available and responsive to children's needs.

Beyond the community
The final element of this framework focuses on the effects of the media. Recent estimates suggest that many young children (ages 2 to 4) spend as much as four hours each day in front of the television (NRC, 2000). While a number of educational programs have been designed to improve children's learning and promote prosocial behaviors (e.g., *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*), most available programming is inappropriate and may even be harmful to young children.

In January 2001, Burke County Partnership for Children, the local Smart Start agency, began the Mobile Preschool Classroom program. It is designed to provide preschool activities to children who do not attend any type of formal child care, and it specifically targets children who will be entering kindergarten the following year.

To get started, the county renovated two school buses to serve as preschool classrooms. These buses travel throughout the county, stopping at various locations to meet with groups of young children. The program currently serves 150 children in nine different locations.

The year-round program is operated by Burke County Public Schools, and each bus is staffed by a certified teacher and teaching assistant. Children receive approximately four hours of instruction each week. The approved early childhood curriculum focuses on helping children be prepared for kindergarten.

Recently, the program received a donation of six laptop computers from Gateway Computer Company, which were installed on one of the buses. To ensure that each child has access to the computers, the buses rotate routes each month.

The program has been particularly well received by the county's Hmong/Laotian residents, who tend to rely more heavily on extended family members rather than formal child care. This Smart Start-funded program has been very successful in introducing these families to the local school system and helping their children transition successfully into kindergarten.

It's clear that preparing children for success in school is more than an educational issue; it is also a health issue, a social issue, and an economic issue. It is an endeavor that requires the energy of every institution supporting the health and well-being of children. While the educational system plays an important role in helping to ensure children's readiness, the goal of readiness cannot be attained without addressing the broader range of issues facing children and their families *(Southern Regional Education Board, 1992)*.

How can Communities Begin to Address Readiness?

Across the country, communities have accepted the challenge of preparing children and helping them to be ready for success in school. However, many of these communities are struggling with the difficulty of organizing and coordinating services for children and their families. In response, communities have turned to establishing a collaborative partnership that involves all the relevant partners. Partnerships represent one of the most effective efforts for creating a flexible, comprehensive system that meets the needs of children and families.

Important Stakeholders in Children's Readiness in North Carolina

- Parents
- Local Smart Start Partnerships
- Cooperative Extension Service
- Child care/preschool
- Head Start
- Even Start
- Public School (e.g., teachers, district staff, administrators, bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria staff)
- Healthcare
- Social service
- Mental health
- Child care resource/referral agency representatives
- Local government
- Local nonprofit (e.g., United Way)
- Business partners
- More at Four

Learning to Collaborate

While community partnerships are an effective way of establishing a comprehensive system, they also are extremely challenging. They involve new relationships among service providers and the children and families they support. They require time, resources, and the willingness of collaborating agencies to learn about and establish trust with each other.

Many factors contribute to the success or failure of a community collaborative, and no two collaboratives operate in exactly the same way. However, there are certain guidelines that may help smooth the way for a more successful partnership, including the following:

- **Involve all key stakeholders.** Include not only those who have the power to effect change, but also representatives from the families whose lives will be affected.

The local Smart Start Partnership boards in North Carolina are required to include a variety of stakeholders. Any similar community collaborative should look for partners who represent a cross-section of the community. Make sure your partners reflect a variety of perspectives, experiences, cultures, and levels of authority. A partnership's efforts to improve readiness will be enriched by a membership that is broad and diverse. Broad representation can help groups identify new and innovative strategies, as well as bring together resources that are flexible and comprehensive.

"Don't underestimate the power of a shared vision." Those are the words of Henrietta Zalkind from Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC). However, achieving that shared vision was not an easy task. To effectively address the issue of children's readiness, the DEPC spent a great deal of time discussing its purpose and refining its vision. These discussions forced the partnership to take a critical look at all of its programs and activities. Those that were not consistent with the overall vision (or were duplicative) were eliminated. While this was very painful and difficult at the time, it has helped DEPC maintain a focus that motivates and encourages hard work.

- **Stay focused on the overall goal.** It's very easy for community partnerships to get bogged down in the day-to-day difficulties of collaboration. Finding a set of common beliefs and values will help remind partners that they are working toward better outcomes for children and their families.

  An important milestone in the life of a partnership is defining a common vision. According to Melaville and Blank (1991), the vision statement "...provides a reason and rationale for joint action...." When the vision is clear, focused, and shared among all of the partners, the collaborative effort is more likely to succeed.

- **Establish communication and decision-making processes that are open and allow conflict to be addressed constructively.** Communication is the cornerstone of effective partnerships; it builds relationships, creates understanding, and strengthens connections.

  An important function of communication is to support children and families as they move from one service provider to the next. For example, child care providers and kindergarten teachers can visit and exchange information about each other's programs to help prepare children for the new setting. Family visits to a new setting also help to open communication and prepare the family for transitions.

- **Discuss the partnership's decision-making process early in its development.** Trying to reach agreement on every issue will be difficult and may even be counterproductive. Establish how the partnership will use consensus, voting, and delegation. Consider forming subcommittees to study issues that the partnership will eventually address. Authorize subcommittees to make recommendations for action to the entire partnership.

- **Institutionalize changes through established policies, procedures, agency agreements and program mandates.** Drafting agency agreements, policies, and program mandates helps formalize the partnership and keeps joint efforts moving forward. Moreover, written agreements help identify roles and responsibilities.

- **Provide adequate time for partners to meet, plan and carry out activities.** Lack of time is always mentioned as a major barrier to the development of effective collaborative efforts. However, the real problem may be impatience and a demand for immediate results. Although the time required to accomplish collaboration may be significant, members must recognize that the eventual outcome will be more effective than if the task had been completed by a single agency.

- **Involve a large number of individuals in leadership.** Shared leadership ensures that many partners understand the history of the organization and that the partnership is not dependent upon any one person or agency.

- **Disseminate data and information from assessments and evaluations.** Share details about how your partnership has helped improve academic performance, school attendance, child health, and other indicators of readiness.

WHAT CHALLENGES MIGHT PARTNERSHIPS FACE?

Forming an effective collaborative partnership is a challenging and complex task that requires time and commitment. The following are some of the difficulties and challenges that partnerships will face as they begin the process of collaboration.

- Some staff or agency representatives may resist giving up exclusive power, or may begin making changes and decisions before all stakeholders have come together.

- Policies and regulations within individual agencies sometimes make it difficult to coordinate services, information, and resources.

- Differences in prior knowledge, beliefs, training, or experience can make it difficult for members to communicate and work together.

- Some members may be reluctant to commit the time necessary to meet and plan together.

Steps to Forming an Effective Collaborative Partnership

To form and sustain a local partnership, community leaders should keep in mind the following steps:

STEP	QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
1. Form the partnership.	Who are the important stakeholders in children's readiness?
2. Establish shared vision of what the community needs and how the partnership will operate.	What are our desired outcomes for children and families? What role should the partnership play in achieving this vision?
3. Conduct a community needs assessment.	What are the current services/ activities related to readiness? What are the gaps in readiness services? What are the potential barriers to successful readiness activities?
4. Develop and implement the action plan.	What does research say about children's readiness? Who will do what when?
5. Evaluate your efforts.	How will we know that our efforts have been effective?
6. Maintain momentum.	How do we anticipate/plan for changes in funding? How can we increase support for our plan?

Adapted from Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993 and Smart Start ToolKit: Planning

Important Lessons Learned by Established Collaborative Partnerships

- **Be patient**. While you may want things to move along more quickly, the fact is that creating systemic change usually takes time.
- **Maintain ongoing communication and interaction** between partners, teachers and the child care community. Your partnership is more likely to grow and thrive in an environment where partners are informed and involved in decision making.
- **Seek the support of superintendents and agency directors.** Very little is going to happen on a systemic level if you don't have the support of these individuals.
- **In getting other people on board, it helps to bring some type of incentive to the table.** Have a thoughtful plan and ask what benefit they receive by coming to the table.
- **It's important to understand that each person, agency, and group has a different piece of the puzzle**. The challenge is bringing all of the pieces together to create a new whole.
- **Don't expect equal contributions from all partners.** Some partners may contribute relatively small, but essential, pieces to the puzzle. Not all partners will contribute equally, but all partners should be valued.
- **When discussions get too bogged down in detail or conflict erupts, revisit the vision, mission and long-term priorities.** This often helps to focus the group and remind them of the overall purpose that makes all of their effort worthwhile.
- **Start at the beginning.** Don't skip the initial steps in the collaborative process.

The Readiness Challenge

As communities begin to develop and initiate new school readiness efforts, they must take into account not only those factors that relate directly to the child, but also those related to the child's family, schools, neighborhood/community and the larger society. This requires that all community agencies and organizations assume a role in and responsibility for providing support for children and families. By working together and combining their efforts, communities will be better able to support the learning and development of young children.

In its efforts to address readiness, the Buncombe County Partnership for Children (BCPC) found that one of its greatest challenges was the lack of communication and trust between kindergarten and preschool teachers. As a result, the partnership has worked diligently to build communication and create a sense of trust between child care and school personnel. Partners began by conducting a school readiness forum involving *all* stakeholders (e.g., child care, kindergarten, Head Start, school administrators, special needs coordinators, etc.). Each agency hosted a roundtable that enabled participants to learn about other programs. In addition to the forum, the partnership hosted a series of focus groups—one involving child care providers, another involving school personnel, and a third involving *both* school personnel and child care providers. Two major issues emerged: (a) many providers expressed concern that the school system would take their four-year-olds and (b) many child care providers felt that there was little respect from the school system for the work that they do.

To further facilitate relationships and encourage feelings of trust, BCPC has incorporated ongoing activities and events that enable teachers and child care providers to come together on a regular basis. In addition, the partnership has sought the help of outside consultants, such as The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, to explain and answer any questions that stakeholders might have regarding North Carolina's School Readiness or More at Four initiatives.

RESOURCES

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Supporting Smart Start publications listed below can be found at: *www.ncsmartstart.org/information/publications.htm*

- North Carolina's Kindergartners and Schools: Report on the School Readiness Pilot Assessment.
- Smart Start Toolkit: Planning.
- Sharing the Stories—Lessons Learned from 5 Years of Smart Start.
- What is Smart Start?

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